

Consensus through accountability? The benefits and drawbacks of building community with accountability

Tony Scott

Through interviews and class observations, the author of this article examines the building of community among teachers and students through high-stakes assessment.

Among the criticisms often made of high-stakes assessments in the United States is that they promote “teaching to the test.” There is little question that, under pressure to produce higher test scores, schools tend to implement more standardized curriculums that are geared toward preparing students to perform well on year-end tests. After all, a school’s future funding, standing in the community, and even degree of independence can be at stake. What is often hotly debated, however, is whether the level of standardization that typically results from high-stakes assessment is best for education. Is “teaching to the test” necessarily bad?

Proponents of high-stakes assessment have argued that, when administered well, large-scale tests and accountability measures need not be ominous for teachers—indeed, they can serve to clarify goals, unify curricula, and foster a greater sense of community among teachers and administrators. Some of the research supports these claims. Berryman and Russell (2001), for in-

stance, described how Kentucky’s high-stakes portfolio assessment led the English department at one U.S. high school to collaborate more actively with teachers of other subjects. In groups, teachers from across disciplines learned to score portfolios accurately and consistently using the state’s holistic scoring rubric. Berryman and Russell argued that this ongoing collaboration on the assessment promoted more dialogue and collegiality among teachers and administrators, and it provided ongoing opportunities for professional development, as teachers learned what writing is valued in the assessment. Huot (1997) described how a portfolio assessment in a writing-across-the-curriculum program created opportunities for more dialogue and understanding between program administrators and non-English teachers.

However, many teachers have also noted the considerable costs that can come with the kinds of communities created by large-scale assessments and systems of accountability. Researching teacher perceptions of Virginia’s state assessment, Winkler (2002) found that while less experienced teachers were appreciative of the collegiality and shared sense of purpose created by the state assessment, veteran teachers believed that the pressure to prepare students for the test limited their agency and eroded their status as professionals. Another study

Scott teaches at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (9201 University City Blvd., Charlotte, NC 28223-0001, USA). E-mail: adscott@uncc.edu.

of the Virginia assessment found that only 22% of teachers felt that it was leading schools in the right direction (Kaplan & Owings, 2001). In general, critics claim that large-scale assessments that are attached to accountability measures have led to loss of teacher and student agency, the “deprofessionalization” of teaching, and the exclusion of local communities from decision-making processes. (See, for instance, Gallagher, 2000; Haney, Madaus, & Lyons, 1993; Jennings, 1998; Mabry, 1999; Tyak & Cuban, 1995.)

I recently conducted a qualitative study in the Kentucky public school system, which has implemented a large-scale portfolio assessment in its schools since 1991. The first state-wide portfolio assessment in the United States, Kentucky’s system incorporated schools’ writing portfolio scores into a system of teacher and school accountability. Among the factors explored in the study is how the state has used a variety of measures—such as professional development workshops, support materials, and ongoing calibration sessions—to promote community among teachers. Rather than simply handing down a set of assessment requirements and target scores, Kentucky has actively sought to promote widespread understanding and support among teachers and administrators. In this article, I draw on my research on reflective writing in the Kentucky system to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of building community among teachers and students through high-stakes assessment. I will describe the organizational logic of the system, how “buy in” functions within that logic, and how my classroom observations and interviews with students complicate the overall picture.

The study

This study resulted in over 500 pages of transcriptions from observations and interviews. It also incorporated hundreds of pages of texts generated at the state, district, and classroom levels, such as handbooks, curriculum support materials, assessment guidelines, and student texts. The

study uses what is best termed *grounded theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). I chose to study two senior English classes in two schools that provided socioeconomic contrast. One, Granger (all site and participant names are pseudonyms), is an urban school where 56% of the students are on free or reduced-cost lunch. The other, East, is a suburban school located in one of the district’s most affluent neighborhoods. Thirty-seven percent of East’s students are on free or reduced-cost lunch. It is widely considered to be among the district’s most desirable public schools. Two high-level administrators, 3 senior English teachers, and 11 students participated in the study.

I conducted 29 substantial interviews. The interviews were intended to incorporate the perspectives of people working at multiple levels of the school system, so participants included a state-level and a district-level administrator—both of whom were instrumental in the design and implementation of the Kentucky portfolio system. The teachers of the two participating English classes, along with 11 students from those classes, were also interviewed. All of the interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and coded. I also conducted 12 classroom observations. During the fall months, I observed several classes that teachers thought would be particularly relevant to the focus of the study. In the spring the observations were more frequent because this was when students compiled their portfolios. The observations were recorded in two ways: Through audiotapes and observational notes. The notes served primarily to record conversations that weren’t audiotaped, to supply information that would be necessary to contextualize the recordings, to describe the physical characteristics of sites, and to reference handouts or other documents I collected that were relevant to the recordings.

I collected a wide variety of documents for this project that have been invaluable in my analysis, including handbooks, assessment guides and related materials, curriculum support materials, model texts, handouts, student texts, and

memos. The voluminous collection of district- and state-generated texts gathered for the study helped me understand the culture created in the state's school system—its bureaucratic structure, curriculum goals, and assessment practices and what it encourages, values, discourages, and penalizes. Often, observations involved the discussion of texts, such as a particular assignment sheet or a state department of education description of a particular genre of writing. During later analysis, these texts were necessary for a more nuanced understanding of certain events.

Though not always possible, I usually transcribed interviews and observations within 48 hours of their recording. This enabled me to more accurately supplement the transcriptions with support notes from my research log and observational notes that provided important details, such as a description of a particular speaker's gesture during an important moment or the location of a specific text mentioned by the speaker. All recordings were transcribed and coded. Consistent with an approach to data collection and analysis that has been called inquiry guided (Mishler, 1990) and dialectical and reflexive (Atkinson, 1990; Van Maanen, 1988), data analysis was a recursive process that transformed my conception of the direction of the project, my research questions, and my methods. The accuracy of the coding scheme was verified with a second reader through selective coding.

Control through communication

In order to understand the Kentucky system, it helps to see it in terms of organizational dynamics—examining how common assumptions and everyday practices fit into the design and goals of the larger curriculum and system of accountability. In *Control Through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (1989), Yates provided a good framework for such an understanding. Yates described how communication systems evolved to meet many of the challenges encountered within rapidly growing

businesses at the end of the 19th century. During this period, large firms found that existing approaches to management were inadequate for controlling complex organizations that were increasingly dispersed over vast geographical spaces. A set of practices that came to be called “systemic management” evolved to meet this challenge. Primarily through the development of sophisticated communications infrastructures, systemic management gradually standardized operations within these large firms, making them more efficient and consistent.

The ultimate goal of the communications infrastructures created within managed systems was to improve consistency and efficiency by substituting managerial systems for the ad hoc decisions made by individual workers in relatively isolated locations. The work done by any particular person in a position below the level of upper management became standardized as improved methods of communication—everyday memos, handbooks, training manuals, procedural outlines, checklists, and so on—ensured that people occupying the same or similar positions were following the same procedures across organizations. Power shifted further up hierarchies—away from supervisors and workers—as constant communication flows and ongoing training helped upper level management control more aspects of daily operations. Ongoing evaluation became a prevalent aspect of workers' lives as assessments became a part of the information flow and influenced management decisions. According to Yates, consensus building became an important facet of managerial systems as a means of building enthusiasm and investment among workers without necessarily lending them more real agency or job security. So communications infrastructures have evolved, in part, to make operations more efficient through socialization, enculturating workers so that systemic values and practices become second nature.

The writing curriculum in Kentucky is managed through a communications system that is in many ways very similar to those described by

Yates (1989). Those who seek to reform state school systems or implement statewide curricula must determine how to replace ad hoc decision making in remote areas with a more efficient, predictable, and measurable process. Kentucky responded by creating a communications infrastructure centered on its portfolio requirement and assessment. It has achieved consistency in its writing curriculum throughout the state by building community and encouraging administrators, teachers, and even students to make the assumptions that drive the curriculum and the processes and vocabulary of assessment. The portfolio is the backbone of that system. The portfolio requirement and the infrastructure that supports it ensure that writing classes follow a similar philosophy and that students produce reasonably similar texts—texts that can be scored reliably within the state’s holistic assessment.

“A vehicle for changing instruction”

In Kentucky, the writing portfolio assessment is a very effective socialization tool. The assessment establishes an explicit set of requirements and provides a means to recognize potential problems among teachers and schools. It also helps to build a common culture through creating a shared vocabulary and a common sense of purpose among teachers, as well as a relatively consistent set of pedagogical classroom practices. According to a high-ranking state official with an important role in the development and implementation of the curriculum and its system of assessment, the state’s portfolio assessment “was created very consciously with the idea that it was a vehicle for changing instruction. That wasn’t a subtext; it wasn’t an offshoot. That was the primary driving force behind setting the portfolio up the way that we did.”

The scoring process promotes collaboration even as it demands that teachers have a nuanced understanding of what the state values and requires. After being completed and turned in by

students, portfolios are evaluated by groups of teachers at the schools where they were compiled. Typically, these groups comprise teachers from across subject areas and are led by English teachers with training in holistic scoring from the state. To ensure consistency and minimize the inflation of scores, schools are chosen every year for state audit. During these audits, a sampling of portfolios is scored by a group from outside the school, and the scores are compared to the scores given by the schools. The portfolios are scored Novice, Apprentice, Proficient, or Distinguished according to the criteria of the Kentucky Writing Assessment Scoring Guide (a grading rubric). These scores become a part of a formula that produces the numbers used to measure schools’ performance in the state’s system of accountability. In terms of state policy, the only direct stakeholders are teachers and schools (not students), but the consequences of the assessment are nevertheless considerable. Public recognition, money, and even degree of autonomy for particular schools are at stake. When schools meet their target scores, teachers can receive significant bonuses, but if target scores are not met, the state can intervene in the school with external consultants.

Though accountability carries rewards and punishments, Kentucky’s department of education does not let the requirements stand nakedly as a set of bureaucratic imperatives sent down from on high. Rather, it has sought to foster consensus through educating teachers concerning the assumptions about language, learning, and organizational goals that drive the system. The *Writing Portfolio Scoring Teacher’s Handbook* (Kentucky Department of Education, 1999a), which is distributed to all English teachers in the state, makes it surprisingly clear that participation in scoring is intended as a process of enculturation, and the internalization of the scoring guide is an important part of that enculturation. As teachers evaluate the portfolios produced at their schools, they are encouraged to work in groups to enhance their understanding of the scoring levels. Because assessment is such an important aspect of the system, the scoring guide is

perhaps the most essential document in Kentucky's portfolio curriculum, and the data for this project show that it is indeed thoroughly internalized by people at all levels.

The administrators, teachers, and students with whom I interacted not only knew the guide well but also typically referred to it in some way in discussions of virtually any aspect of writing. Moreover, both participating teachers and state administrators indicated that thorough understanding of the scoring guide is an essential aspect of teacher training. Calibration with the guide and benchmark portfolios, therefore, continues to be an integral part of professional development for teachers in Kentucky. Teachers need to be able to internalize the state's standards and apply them to benchmark portfolios, consistently giving the portfolios the same ratings as state evaluators do. The scoring process is described in the *Writing Portfolio Scoring Teacher's Handbook* (Kentucky Department of Education, 1999a) as a mechanism that creates synchronicity between the state and the teachers' standards and pedagogy: "[Annual calibration and scoring] reinforce one of the main purposes of portfolio assessment: with each year, development and assessment of portfolios will become more fully integrated with classroom instruction" (p. 3).

Teachers learn to score consistently according to the state rubric and then, in turn, train their students to use the assessment rubric and evaluate their own writing accordingly. So, through day-to-day critical analysis, the recursive process of evaluation and revision that every writer performs is channeled through the state assessment. A district-level writing curriculum administrator referred to the standards outlined in the rubric as "the backbone of every school curriculum." She said, "If you don't understand the standards, then you can't teach to the standards." She might have said just as accurately, "If you don't understand the scoring rubric then you can't teach to the rubric."

Ultimately, the portfolio assessment serves organizational imperatives by ensuring that there

is consistency in teaching and writing in classrooms across the system. The portfolio—along with curriculum support materials, state-sponsored workshops, and regular calibration sessions—conveys particular assumptions about language and learning down the hierarchical ladder to teachers and students (in the language of business management, "information downflow"). In turn, at the end-of-year assessment, portfolios provide information about the performance of schools and teachers ("information upflow"). The portfolio has thereby been the hub of a systematic effort to enact a consistent writing curriculum in the state.

Buying in

During interviews, the term *buy in* was used on a number of occasions by teachers and administrators to refer to people who are fully enculturated: They sincerely embrace the system's philosophy and the logic of its bureaucratic practices. Veteran teacher Alice Russell indicated that she was able to buy in because she believes that the Kentucky curriculum is firmly in line with current, national perceptions of "best practices" in writing instruction. So it was easy for her to tweak her pedagogy to meet the system's requirements. She hates the concept of teaching to a test but said, "I could do it [teach to Kentucky's portfolio] very easily within the context of what I already teach." Through the portfolio, the system provides a curriculum and goes to some lengths to help teachers understand the philosophical rationale for that curriculum. Embracing the rationale leads to buying into the curriculum and believing in the validity of the system of accountability to which it is attached. Meeting the requirements of the curriculum is far less troubling and burdensome when you believe that they are consistent with your own values and beliefs.

This was a point echoed by other teacher participants: They recognize that Kentucky promotes a specific curriculum and a specific view of writing and learning, but they are persuaded that

the state's view is consistent with what they believe is best and most current, so they don't find it overly restrictive. Teacher Jerry Thompson not only embraces the curriculum but also made a point of emphasizing that he feels fortunate to work in a department with colleagues who also buy in. He believes that this shared set of assumptions, along with the fact that the department is held accountable as a unit, enhances its effectiveness. The curriculum creates a common understanding that enables his department to function more efficiently. The department at Thompson's school has developed a common schedule that enables classes to move toward completion of the portfolios at the same pace. They proceed through each of the textual modes required for the state portfolio one by one, allotting time for students to draft and revise each piece based on teacher and peer feedback. "So even if a kid goes from one class to another, we are still doing the same thing," Thompson said. They move through the pieces in their listed order in the guide and handbooks: A unit on personal expressive writing is first and is followed by a literary unit and then a transactive unit. The sequence ends with a unit on the reflective letter. Teachers in all classes respond to students' work based on the state scoring guide.

At least in Thompson's department, a lack of buy in, or at least a lack of compliance, would put a teacher out of step with his or her colleagues: That teacher would not be making the same assignments in the same sequence and would not be evaluating the students' writing according to the same criteria. Ultimately, this could very well lead to lower scores for the portfolios generated in that class, which would pull down the average for the entire department. There is plenty of systemic incentive to buy in.

Within the system, buy in even carries its own specialized language, and thorough understanding and reasonable agreement concerning the language of the state scoring guide seemed very important to writing teachers. During my visits to one school at the end of the year, as its

English department was assessing its portfolios, I observed teachers rigorously discussing their students' portfolios in terms of the scoring guide—working through and interpreting its language word by word. One such conversation was about the scoring guide's description of a Distinguished portfolio: It establishes a purpose and maintains a clear focus. Two teachers argued over whether part of that definition means that the portfolio is not Distinguished if it does not maintain focus throughout all of the required pieces. One teacher thought that it was adequate for purpose and clear focus to be generally present in the pieces, but the other thought that in order for a portfolio to be considered Distinguished, all of the work should have a clear purpose and focus. The discussion was lengthy and detailed, with each teacher referring to models provided in the *Writing Portfolio Scoring Teacher's Handbook* (Kentucky Department of Education, 1999a). Eventually, both teachers agreed to defer to the judgment of the department head. The goal of these discussions, as in holistic-scoring calibration sessions, was to divine the right meaning of the rubric rather than to question the rubric's efficacy for teaching and learning or its universality. I found that, among teachers and administrators, the scoring rubric represents the largely unquestioned standard by which work should be assessed. Buying in means thoroughly understanding systemic standards, accepting them as right (or at least as what is best), and being able to apply them consistently and correctly.

I was somewhat surprised that participating teachers also generally described the system of accountability as a positive feature. Among other things, it has brought everyone to a single standard, which they believe is fair. Veteran teacher Wanda Sloan said that the implementation of a statewide assessment brought order to the system, forcing teachers to reflect on their pedagogy in light of the common standard by which they would all be evaluated. For her, regular calibration provides ongoing clarity concerning the expectations of the assessment and her own goals.

She indicated that the benchmarks are always on her mind:

If you have the benchmark, you can see what that means, and then you can also see what happens when they are on the borderline, you know, that it could go either way. So if you are continually revisiting those, that's in my mind all of the time.

Resisting buy in

There is reason to believe that Kentucky has been very successful at fostering widespread support for its system of assessment. A study led by Hillocks (2002) found that

over three quarters (76.6%) [of teachers] believe that the state assessment supports the kind of writing program they would want in their schools. Over two thirds (67.2%) are positive about the scoring rubric.... Perhaps most impressive is that nearly 80% of the teachers interviewed feel that the portfolio assessment has helped to improve writing in the state. (p. 197)

Throughout the state, however, some teachers still don't buy in and find ways to resist. Participating teachers and administrators articulated the reasons for that resistance in remarkably similar terms. Admitting that initially the system's policies were confusing, too suddenly implemented, and led to low morale, the teacher participants nevertheless felt that the curriculum has now been established long enough for teachers to fully understand it, and they were disparaging of teachers who resisted. Indeed, there was a remarkable degree of consistency in the reasons that participating teachers cited for the continued resistance of some of their colleagues. One reason cited was a lack of willingness to change with the times. As Wanda Sloan described it,

It's kind of like anything in education; you either go with the flow or you don't go with the flow. And a lot of teachers, particularly teachers that had five or fewer years left in their tenure, didn't want to change. Change is hard; change takes time and patience. Consequently, a lot of the low morale was from teach-

ers who had been mired in the system for a long time and were on the verge of getting out.

"Going with the flow" means genuinely buying into the system, and according to Sloan, many teachers who don't buy in still teach portfolios, only as an add on to curricula that continue to keep the primary focus on literature.

Participating teachers also articulate the difference between those who buy into the curriculum and those who don't as a split between progressives (who embrace change and understand contemporary theories in writing pedagogy) and pedagogical conservatives (who resist change and want to focus entirely on literature). This difference in philosophies was the cause of a split in the department at one of the sites of the study. As Jerry Thompson described it, the line between the two camps was sharply drawn:

When I first came here, the department was actually divided into two camps. [One was] the traditionalists, where the teacher is the god that dispenses the information and breaks it down into skills and feeds it to the babies one morsel at a time. And then we had the other camp which was really wonderful process people—people who wanted to involve the students as a part of instruction. And it was a horrible battle. Fighting over grammar, of all things, instead of what is best for the students—whether you teach grammar or not. And so, over five years, those people have either retired or been run off. So now we are all kind of on the same wavelength. There are still a few teachers who aren't really sold on it, but I think that is primarily because they haven't been exposed to it.

Again, the distinction is between progressives who understand and embrace the writing curriculum and traditionalists who either reject the curriculum's stated values (student ownership, "authentic" rhetorical forms, and leveled authority) or just don't understand it.

A number of scholars have argued that communities can have a considerable downside (e.g., Young, 1990). Belonging is almost inevitably defined against otherness: In order to have members, communities must have outsiders. In the

community created by this assessment, a teacher's insider status is defined, at least in part, by how well he or she understands and supports the assessment's rationale. Buying in is likely to lead to more common ground with colleagues, less ad hoc decision making, more consistent pedagogical practices, and higher test scores. Lack of understanding or support for the assessment could not only lead to lower test scores for a teacher's students but also to alienation from colleagues.

"Proficient before Christmas"

The Kentucky portfolio curriculum carries a specific set of assumptions that are linked to a particular language and a set of social practices. In order to be most successful, students, in addition to their teachers, should share a common discourse. The *Writing Portfolio Development Teacher's Handbook* (Kentucky Department of Education, 1999b) encourages teachers to help their students "develop a clearer understanding of the categories of writing required in the portfolio (reflective, personal, literary, and transactive) and what category might be most appropriate in a given area" (p. 55). Thompson described teaching with Kentucky portfolios as a means of helping students to understand the writing philosophy that is carried by the particular language of the Kentucky system. He indicated that it had gotten easier with each new year as students came into their senior year with one more year of exposure to the system than the previous group had.

It is kind of a philosophy you use and that really seems to be helping, because they are not scared by any of it, and you don't have to teach them the language of it the way that you did a few years ago. Where you have to tell them what a personal narrative was and they didn't know, well "What is an audience again?" and things like that.

When I asked Thompson whether he thought that his students had internalized the curricular language before they even came into the classroom, his answer indicated that students were, by

their senior year, perhaps so familiar with the Kentucky curriculum's basic vocabulary that they found it tedious:

Yes, you could see that their eyes go [rolls his eyes] "I have heard that somewhere before." Whereas just a few years ago, literally you had to teach them the language and get the [state grading rubric] out and say, this is what we are using and this is the different areas. And you are talking about a good six weeks just to give them a vocabulary.

Thompson is conscious that he teaches a philosophy that is carried by a particular vocabulary. In the classes I observed throughout the year, the internalization of curricular vocabulary and standards was indeed an important goal. An understanding of the scoring guide seemed particularly important in the English department at Thompson's school, where students were compelled to continue drafting each required piece until their teachers believed that they would get a Proficient rating in the state assessment. In the times during which students were revising their pieces for their portfolios, it was only when Thompson believed a particular piece was likely to get a Proficient rating that he put it permanently into the student's folder and encouraged him or her to move on to a new piece. The state grading rubric was the primary determinant of when a piece was complete.

During workshop time in a class I observed, I asked one student participant from Thompson's class what she would be working on that day. She said that she would be drafting her short story because it had to be "Proficient before Christmas." When I asked her whether she would be able to work on it after that, she said "No," that once it is Proficient, it goes into her folder and "once it goes in, it can't come back out. Once it is Proficient it don't need no more work anyway." During the same class, her teacher handed a paper back to a student with his comments and said, "Just do these things and it will be Proficient." Another student looked up and asked, "She is Proficient?" "Yes," the teacher answered. "Daaaammn," the

student replied. He seemed sincerely impressed. Typical of what I regularly observed, this exchange exhibits the common language and shared understanding of standards and procedures that have been created within this system. Students in Thompson's class knew that the "literary piece," one of five modes required by the state for a complete portfolio, had to be finished before Christmas. They knew precisely what writing would meet that requirement, and they knew precisely what criteria would be used to evaluate it. They also knew that the minimum goal was Proficient and that Thompson would keep responding to their work and giving it back until they either ran out of time or he thought it would get a Proficient rating. The assessment creates a common vocabulary among students and between students and teachers, and it clarifies goals for students and teachers. It, therefore, brings—in the language of systemic management—a degree of efficiency and consistency to daily operations.

The costs of creating culture

During an interview, I asked an administrator what she thought of the charge (made in Whitford & Jones, 2000) that the portfolio curriculum in Kentucky may ultimately just be another form of teaching to the test. She answered,

If it is true then thank heavens, because we were teaching to the assessment before. The assessment was a multiple-choice test of correctness. And we were teaching to the assessment badly in most cases—with spelling lists, with disconnected words, with exercises out of books. We weren't even teaching grammar and punctuation in the context of writing. We were practicing for tests. And so one of the great things about the portfolio, when it is done well, is that it is not that you are teaching to the assessment.... The product of teaching is the assessment. That's what it is supposed to be. It is not that we are doing all of these exercises, these stupid extra things, for the assessment—that we are teaching the portfolio, a stupid thing. It is that we teach writing in our school[s].

Within the context of Kentucky schools, I am sympathetic to this viewpoint. The portfolio curriculum in Kentucky was part of an answer to a political and public demand for reform. Kentucky schools were not performing well before the 1991 legislative act that led to the development of this curriculum and assessment—in fact, they were a statewide embarrassment. Though controversial inside and outside the state, the Kentucky curriculum is now a national model, and few who are familiar with the system would argue that the writing portfolio has not significantly improved the writing of Kentucky's students.

Nevertheless, large-scale assessments that are attached to systems of accountability can have multiple, extremely mixed consequences. In spite of my deep admiration for the aims of the Kentucky system and the teachers and administrators who participated in the study, I am troubled by the degree to which producing texts that met the state's requirements for the portfolio and scored well according to its rubric dominated the activities of classes and limited the agency of teachers and students. The curriculum is clearly designed to lend students agency and ownership. Consider the following passage from the *Writing Portfolio Development Teacher's Handbook* (Kentucky Department of Education, 1999b):

Since students must have total ownership of their writing, any intervention from teachers, peers, and/or others should enhance rather than remove or diminish that ownership and should be offered in the spirit of helping students reassess their own work.... The Kentucky Writing Portfolio Assessment acknowledges the students as sole creators, authors, and owners of their work. Teachers serve as colleagues, coaches, mentors, and critics. Parents, friends, and other students assume roles of listeners, responders, and encouragers. (p. 1)

This statement offers an attractive vision, but the Kentucky writing portfolio curriculum is strained by its multiple mandates. Implicit in the curriculum and assessment is the assumption that the portfolio can meet the assessment needs

of the educational bureaucracy *and* the learning needs of students through a progressive, student-centered pedagogy. It envisions a curriculum that generates student work that is measured as part of a statewide system of assessment and accountability; yet the students are also expected to feel ownership over that work. The implicit assumption is that a single curriculum can at once serve the function of systemic management through explicit requirements and procedures; “provide information” about students, teachers, and programs through assessment measures; and empower students by giving them ownership over their work and some choices within the assessment system. In short, the vision is of a system that solicits and evaluates student work but doesn’t significantly determine the form and content of that work.

I don’t think that this is the reality in Kentucky schools. In my research I found that virtually every aspect of the composition of the texts that would be included in students’ portfolios, from the initial idea to the final revisions, was informed by systemic expectations and goals that were either explicitly stated or strongly implied in state-generated handbooks and support materials. Teachers spent considerable time in their classes articulating the state’s requirements for the portfolios and ensuring that students molded their work so that it conformed to the state’s definitions of the required pieces and scored as well as possible in the state’s assessment system. Students’ composition processes were informed, and to a certain extent determined, by volumes of support documents—lengthy descriptions and models of required texts, checklists, assessment rubrics, and so on. It is arguable that actively promoting buy in as a matter of systemic policy can create more widespread consensus and compliance, but agency and ownership are unavoidably diminished. A system that actively fosters consensus can be just as controlling, just as hostile to deviation and innovation, as a system that implements rigid curricular requirements without making an effort to explain their rationale. Control may be even more effectively main-

tained through social pressure than through direct mandates.

There is also a cost for students. During interviews, most students indicated that they felt as though they were producing work primarily so that the system could evaluate itself, and this had a great effect on their investment, their perception of writing, and their sense of agency. Participating students indicated that they had little feeling of ownership when describing the work in their portfolios, and they expressed considerable frustration with the process of revision that their pieces undergo in order to get to a Proficient rating. When I asked Octavia (a participating student) who owns her writing portfolio, she replied,

I believe that my teacher owns my portfolio.... I think it serves the teacher’s purpose and the paper belongs to the teacher, because once you are finished most of the stuff in the paper is not what you were thinking, because they changed the way it was worded and the way it was put together.... It is just to judge the school.... Until the teacher thinks it is at the Proficient level, it is not going in [the portfolio]. That is how it is. Without a Proficient it is not going in there because, like I said, if all of the senior class as a whole has a Proficient on their writing the teachers will be praised because you did a good job, you taught your students well and all of this. But if it is not Proficient—if we all have Apprentice [rating]—it is like, well, is there something you all could have done better to get them writing on the Proficient level?

In interviews, students consistently indicated that they understand that their portfolios are mandated by the state, they are required to write papers in certain modes in order to have a complete portfolio, their portfolios will be assessed within a state system of accountability, and there are stakes attached to that assessment for teachers and schools. Again, in the Kentucky curriculum, learning, pedagogy, and systemic prerogatives are inextricably bound, and this is no secret to students. While students were often ambivalent about the degree to which the curriculum has helped them to become better writers, most

students interviewed for the study expressed strong dissatisfaction with the constraints the assessment put on their writing and class time and the pressure they felt to produce work that scored well according to the state criteria. In general they described a system in which they learned to produce texts that would meet the state's portfolio requirements and score well on the assessment, but it was for the benefit of their teachers and schools. Their own sense of ownership and investment was, therefore, greatly diminished. This puts the Kentucky writing portfolio at risk of failing to live up to the promise of portfolio pedagogy, as described by many of its proponents (e.g., Belanoff, 1994; Belanoff & Elbow, 1991; Larson, 1996; Murphy & Camp, 1996; Underwood, 1999; Weinbaum, 1991; Weiser, 1997). Within this system, a student's work is valued mainly as an indicator of systemic performance rather than an end in itself.

Conclusions

No Child Left Behind (2002) codified into U.S. federal law a national testing trend that has been well underway for over 30 years. Tests are devised that measure certain indicators, numbers are produced, and those numbers can and often do become a part of public and bureaucratic discussions of schools and education. The focus of these discussions is typically on how to improve the numbers, which assume an authority of their own. Meanwhile, there is little discussion or awareness outside of limited education and academic circles of how the large-scale assessment systems constrain the everyday work of teachers and students. While conducting the study, I observed classes taught by experienced and highly competent teachers who had been recognized for their excellence by colleagues and the system and who embraced the state's writing curriculum. They had a sophisticated understanding of writing portfolio pedagogy and clearly shared a sense of community with many of their colleagues. Moreover, their students consistently scored well on the state's portfolio assessments. However, stu-

dents generally indicated little feeling of ownership over their writing, and they expressed frustration with how pressure to produce texts that scored well on the state assessment dictated their writing processes.

The cost of promoting a consistent portfolio curriculum and centering accountability measures on student performance might inevitably be that too much of the work, and even the thinking, of teachers and students is systematized—made to order for assessment. The Kentucky portfolio has not solved this problem. The aggressive promotion of portfolio pedagogy as a method of systemic reform has been a Catch-22 in Kentucky. The broad administrative goals that have almost certainly raised the general quality of writing education in the state (i.e., pedagogical consistency and a system of teacher and school accountability) might also be incompatible with the progressive pedagogical values that the system seeks to promote. The cost of achieving greater systemic consistency and gathering statistically reliable numbers for accountability might inevitably be the individual agency, local innovation, and freedom of inquiry that many of us believe must characterize high-quality education. More research that examines assessments at multiple levels (from the perspectives of administrators, teachers, *and* students, for instance) might help us to better understand, and raise the public awareness of, the hidden costs of large-scale assessments and accountability.

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